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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-5401

State Capital Group
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Good afternoon and as we say here, *buen provecho*. I hope you are enjoying your lunch. For those of you who are visiting Puerto Rico, welcome to our beautiful island. I am not a cynical man, so I will not assume that your choice of location had anything to do with the balmy weather, the golden beaches, or *las piña coladas*.

As an attorney, I feel very much at home among all of you. I want to note in particular my good friends and former colleagues from the law firm of O'Neill & Borges, who are hosting this luncheon. Thank you for inviting me here today. I thought you might find it edifying—and, I hope, interesting—to hear a little about my experience thus far in the U.S. Congress.

Mindful of the cliché that brevity is the soul of wit, I will do my best to keep this short and avoid supplying you with too many details of legislation.

And of course, I would be happy to answer questions you have on any topic once I finish my remarks.

In January, after 18 grueling but incredibly rewarding months on the campaign trail and an all-too-brief transition period, I was sworn in as Puerto Rico's 19th resident commissioner in

Washington. The position of resident commissioner is unique in our American system.

Accordingly, it presents a very particular set of opportunities and challenges. Unlike all other members of the House, who must stand for election every two years, my term in office is for four years.

In addition, the people of Puerto Rico are not represented in the U.S. Senate, so I am responsible for making Puerto Rico's case in both chambers of Congress. The resident commissioner—alone—represents nearly four million U.S. citizens. By contrast, my colleagues in the House hail from districts whose population size averages about 650,000.

If Puerto Rico were a state, it would have two senators and at least six representatives. As it currently stands, however, it is just me up there.

But of course, I am not really alone. I work closely with PRFAA, which represents our new Governor, Luis Fortuño, in the nation's capital.

Furthermore, a significant—and, I believe, growing—number of members of Congress care deeply about Puerto Rico issues and go to considerable lengths to help protect the Island's interests. Some of these members have small or virtually non-existent numbers of Puerto Ricans living in their states or districts.

But perhaps they took a trip to Puerto Rico, had a Puerto Rican friend, or otherwise became knowledgeable about Puerto Rico issues. In general, I think it is fair to say that some of my colleagues in Congress, especially those from states with significant Puerto Rican populations

like New York, New Jersey, Chicago, Connecticut, Illinois and Florida—are motivated both by principle and by good old-fashioned politics. Which is exactly how it should be.

Finally, Puerto Rico has a true champion in President Obama and his White House staff. I had the honor of serving as the co-chair of then-candidate Barack Obama's presidential primary campaign in Puerto Rico. Not being able to pull the lever for Obama in the general election—because residents of Puerto Rico cannot vote for president—was deeply disheartening.

It did little to diminish the joy I felt upon witnessing his historic victory, which took place on the same day that Governor Fortuño and I were swept into office by a people hungry for change.

Due to his intellect, experience and unique upbringing, I think that President Obama understands—almost intuitively—the many challenges confronting Puerto Rico, whether in the area of economic development, health care, or political status.

Based on what I have witnessed thus far, President Obama and his staff seem determined to translate the various Puerto Rico-related pledges he made during the campaign into concrete action. One of my most important jobs is to facilitate this process whenever and however I can.

I am very much looking forward to working with the Obama Administration as it undertakes broad efforts to unfreeze credit markets, enact comprehensive health care reform, and promote a clean energy economy.

As you know all too well, when I took the oath of office in January with my new colleagues in the 111th Congress, our country was mired in a financial and economic crisis from which it has yet to emerge. The situation here in Puerto Rico was—and remains—particularly dire. The Island's unemployment rate is 13%, the highest in the country by a substantial margin.

In addition, Governor Fortuño inherited a \$3 billion dollar deficit from his predecessor. On a per capita basis, this too is the highest in the country. These are the sort of first-place finishes for which we don't want to be known for.

On the local level Governor Fortuño has taken strong and decisive action, implementing a series of vitally important steps to save the Island's economy. The Governor, who is a close friend, has my unconditional support in this endeavor.

On the federal level, well before we were sworn in, the Obama Administration and Congress began to draft and debate legislation that would become the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the single largest funding bill in American history.

As you can imagine, given both the urgency and the sheer enormity of our task, easing gradually into my new job was not an option. Long before I felt comfortable navigating the

maze-like halls of Congress on my own, I was running from meeting to meeting with key committee chairmen and their staffs.

Before I found the time to decorate my office with framed pictures of my family, I was explaining the needs of working families in Puerto Rico to anyone in Congress who would listen. And I gave my first speech on the House floor—about Medicaid—before I filled out the paperwork to enroll myself in a health care plan.

The entire process has been exhausting, but exhilarating—and it is exactly what I came to Congress to do. The results of our hard work on the Recovery bill were very positive—and I cannot emphasize enough that this was a team effort in every sense.

From Governor Fortuño and his staff, to the members of Congress who are friends of Puerto Rico, as well as my own staff—we all shared a common goal: to ensure that the bill provided equitable treatment for the U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico, who deserve nothing less.

Among the many highlights of the final legislation was a 30% increase in the federal contribution to Puerto Rico's Medicaid program, which represents the largest single increase in the Island's history; the allocation of more than \$1 billion dollars in funding for Puerto

Rico's schools and students; and the provision of hundreds of millions of dollars to improve roads and bridges, support and retrain unemployed workers, provide food aid and affordable housing to low-income residents, improve drinking water, and support alternative energy projects.

In all, we estimate that more than \$5 billion in much-needed funding will flow to Puerto Rico over the next two years, including money provided pursuant to certain federal tax credit programs from which low-income residents of Puerto Rico have historically—and I think unfairly—been excluded.

While the Recovery bill was certainly the primary object of my efforts during these months, it was far from the only legislative measure or activity that I was dealing with. Members of Congress, like law firm attorneys, rarely (if ever) have the luxury of being able to concentrate on one matter at a time.

Within weeks of my arrival, as I shuttled from freshmen orientation sessions to substantive meetings on the Recovery bill, I was selected by the House Democrat leadership to sit on three congressional committees: namely, Education and Labor, Natural Resources and Judiciary.

I also sought—and received—an assignment to two subcommittees within each of these committees, for a total of six subcommittees, which I believe ties me for the most committee assignments of any member. In one respect, this owes to a high tolerance for pain on my part.

In another respect, however, my choice was grounded in simple necessity. The resident commissioner—like the delegates from the other four U.S. territories and the District of Columbia—cannot vote on final passage of a bill on the House floor. So, much of the legislative work I do in Congress must occur at the committee and subcommittee levels.

My seat on the Education and Labor Committee, which is chaired by Congressman George Miller from California, enables me to be an active participant in our ongoing national debate over school reform.

It also affords me a unique station from which to address the particular problems facing Puerto Rico's schools and universities, its teachers, and—above all—Island students of every age. Puerto Rico's future, like that of any jurisdiction, is intimately tied to its local education system—and, right now, that system is failing far too many of our young people.

Among the many education-related priorities I intend to pursue, I hope to explore ways to improve English-language instruction in Puerto Rico's public schools.

The Island's sons and daughters must be proficient in English in order to compete in the global economy. The time for debating this point is over.

English proficiency opens so many doors that will otherwise remain sealed shut for Puerto Rico's youth. To deny our children the opportunity to learn English is to deny them their chance for a better future. It is as simple as that.

My seat on the Natural Resources Committee, which is chaired by Nick Rahall from West Virginia, likewise presents me with the chance to pursue important national and Puerto Rico-specific goals. First and foremost, like previous resident commissioners, I am a member of the subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife, which is led by my friend, Madeleine Bordallo from the U.S. territory of Guam.

The subcommittee on Insular Affairs has primary jurisdiction over the issue of Puerto Rico's political status, a subject of unsurpassed importance that I will return to in a moment.

In general, membership in the Committee on Natural Resources will make it easier for me to protect Puerto Rico's countless natural wonders and historic landmarks, from our coral reefs, to our Spanish-era forts, to the tropical rain forest known as *El Yunque*.

If you have not yet had the chance to snorkel or scuba dive along Puerto Rico's coral reefs, or to visit the fort system in Old San Juan, or to bathe in *El Yunque*'s waterfalls, I strongly encourage you to do so.

Finally, I regard my membership on the Judiciary Committee, which is chaired by John Conyers from Detroit, as my most intellectually fulfilling committee assignment.

Even after 24 years as a private and government attorney, including four years as Puerto Rico's attorney general, I can't help to be surprised by the diversity and complexity of the legal issues that come before the Committee at a mind-boggling pace.

To give you just a little sampling: the Committee has already considered bills to reauthorize and expand a federal program that helps state and local law enforcement hire more cops and purchase new crime-fighting technology; to amend the Bankruptcy Code to allow judges to modify the terms of mortgages for individuals whose remaining payments exceed the market values of their homes; to require radio stations to pay royalties to record labels and artists each time they play an artist's song; and to grant the District of Columbia a single voting member in the House of Representatives.

I think the reference to the D.C. Voting Rights bill and the issues raised by that legislation mark the appropriate point to briefly discuss the matter of Puerto Rico's political status.

Puerto Rico is a United States territory. It has been under the U.S. flag since 1898 and its residents have been U.S. citizens since 1917. Men and women from Puerto Rico have served in every major war and conflict this country has fought since World War I.

You would be hard-pressed to find a single unit in any branch of the U.S. military that does not include servicemen and women from Puerto Rico. Indeed, the percentage of the Island's sons and daughters currently serving in the military is greater than the percentage in 49 of the 50 states. Yet, as noted, despite their U.S. citizenship and their disproportionate contribution to our Nation's defense, the Island's four million residents cannot vote for their president and commander-in-chief, are not represented in the Senate, and send a single non-voting member to the House.

Moreover, the people of Puerto Rico have never been given the chance to vote, in a referendum authorized by the U.S. Congress, as to whether they are satisfied with their current status or whether they would like to pursue a different status, such as statehood, independence, or free association.

For nearly a century, my constituents have never been afforded the right to be heard on this, the most fundamental of issues.

The people of Puerto Rico have waited long enough. For that reason, in the coming months, in close consultation with Governor Fortuño, the White House, my colleagues in Congress and stakeholders on the Island, I intend to introduce legislation that would give the U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico the right to express their views regarding the Island's political status.

I want to be very clear. Like Governor Fortuño and the majority of the Puerto Rico legislature, I am a strong proponent of statehood for Puerto Rico. I believe that statehood is the right and logical destination for Puerto Rico with every fiber of my being.

But my current role in Congress is not to advocate for statehood. My job, and perhaps my most important responsibility at this point, is to advocate for a neutral process of self-determination for my people.

For this reason, I will introduce a fair and impartial bill that will not stack the deck in favor of any status option.

I will work with members of Congress who love the Island but whose vision for its future may differ from my own. And I will not let the perfect become the enemy of the good. A good status bill that passes is better than a perfect status bill that does not.

It is about time that Congress hears directly from the people of Puerto Rico.

Thank you.